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# The True Image of the Father

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## The True Image of the Father

According to the anaphora prayer in the Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom, God the Father is “inexpressible, inconceivable, invisible, incomprehensible, ever existing”. He transcends every created essence and His essence is known only to Himself, to his Son, and to the Holy Spirit. God the Father never assumed the likeness of any material form nor was he ever incarnate.

In the theophanies of the Old Testament, as our Holy Fathers bear witness, it was not God the Father Who appeared, but rather always our Saviour, the Only-begotten of the Father (i.e., the Word or Logos, the Angel of the Lord, the Lord of Sabaoth, the Angel of Great Counsel, the Ancient of Days) Who revealed himself to the Prophets and seers of the Old Testament.

Some in their limited, human reasoning assumed that in the vision of the Prophet Daniel (7:9-22), the white hair of the Ancient of Days indicate that He is the Father. However, the Father is not older than the Son, for They both have existed together from before eternity. There was never a time when the Son was not: They are co-eternal and equal in existence. The vision clearly prefigures Christ at the Last Judgment, for it is He Who will sit as judge in that day. There is also in intimation of the incarnation of Christ, for a son of man was brought to the Ancient of Days, which further indentifies Him with Christ. Thus has the Church always believed. In the service of the Meeting of our Lord in the Temple (February 2), we read in the Liti: “The Ancient of Days Who in times past gave Moses the law on Sinai appeareth this day as a babe. . . .” Also, “The Ancient of Days, a young child in the flesh, was brought to the temple by His mother.” In a sessional hymn for the same feast, “The Ancient of Days becometh a child for my sake.” On the Fifth Sunday of Lent, in the ninth ode of Matins, “. . . wondrously thou gavest birth . . . to the Ancient of Days as a newborn child.” Furthermore the Great Council of Moscow 1666-1667 in chapter 43 declares the Ancient of Days or the Lord Sabaoth is Jesus Christ. As we have said, it is always



CHRIST AS THE ANCIENT OF DAYS  
*Wall painting. Georgia. Fourteenth century.*



THE PANTOCRATOR  
 RULER OF ALL

St. Nectarius of Aegina demonstrates in his *Orthodox Holy Catechism*, pp. 246-256 that Jehovah (Yahweh), the Lord in the Old Testament, is the Lord Jesus and not God the Father, Who speaks only through His Word. No Father of the Church has ever taught differently from the foregoing statements.

\* \* \* \* \*

God the Father cannot be depicted. The Holy Trinity cannot be depicted because the Father and the Holy Spirit never became incarnate, that is, united with matter so as to be identified with a specific material form.

Any attempt to render an image or representation of them gives rise to idolatry since the essence and substance of the divinity is beyond description, perception, and comprehension. Idolatry has been condemned and forbidden by the Holy Scriptures, the saints, and the tradition and canons of the Church and by God Himself.

When we create a false image of God, this false image becomes a barrier between us and God.

It is, in fact, not God the Father, but God the Word Who speaks and appears to mankind in both the Old and New Testament.

The Word of God, the express image of the Father, can be depicted since He became incarnate.

“And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us (and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the Only-begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth” (John 1:14).

“I am in the Father and the Father in Me” (John 14:21)

“He that hath seen Me hath seen the Father” (John 14:9)

This is the true image of the Father.



CHRIST AS THE ANCIENT OF DAYS

*Fresco. Kastoriá. Twelfth century.*

the Word of God, not the Father, Who speaks and appears in the Old Testament.

Likewise, in the New Testament, God the Father never appeared but bore witness to his Son on several occasions by a voice that was heard from Heaven. It is for this reason that our Saviour said, "No man hath seen God at any time; the only-begotten Son, Who is in the bosom of the Father, He hath declared Him," (John 1:18) and "Not that any man hath seen the Father, save He which is of God; He hath seen the Father" (John 6:46). "Ye have neither heard His voice nor seen His shape" (John 5:37).

Also, in his work, *The Preaching of the Apostles*, St. Irenaeus of Lyons says, "All the visions of this kind [i.e., in the Old Testament] refer to the Son of God, in His being with people and speaking to them. Certainly, it is not the Father of all, the Creator, for He is never seen by the world.... It was not the Father who stood in a specific place and spoke with Abraham. That was the Word of God, who was always with mankind, foretelling what was to come and acquainting man with God" (chap. 44). In his vision recorded in the sixth chapter of his prophecy, Esaias saw and heard the Word of God, and not God the Father. This is declared by St. John the Evangelist, "These things said Esaias, when he saw His glory, and spake of Him" (John 12:4).

The Doxasticon (Glory) of the Matins service for Saint Stephen (December 27) testifies, "As thou stoodest fast in thy trials, O Saint, thou didst see the Heavens open and didst behold the Son of God standing at the right hand of the invisible Father." In letters to Ecumenical Patriarch Germanus I and Emperor Leo the Isaurian, Pope Gregory II of Rome wrote, "If the Lord had not assumed flesh, the holy icon of Him incarnate could not have been depicted" (Act Four of the Seventh Ecumenical Council); and again, "Why do we not delineate and portray the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ? Because we have not seen Him" (these letters are included in the Minutes of the Seventh Ecumenical Council). The Council goes on to specify which icons are permitted: "The precious Cross, our Lord and God and Saviour Jesus Christ, our immaculate Lady the

Christ appeared to thee, O marvelous man, escorted by two angels, and through hospitality you abode in the same tabernacle with God and the angels. O blessed tabernacle, which contained by dispensation God with the angels!

(*ibid.*, 546)

Because Abraham was hospitable, he saw God with two angels in the form of travelers.

(Saint Symeon of the Wondrous Mountain, *PG* 86, 3016B)

If fathers are being received, let it be done after the manner of Abraham, who washed the feet of the Master and the Angels, and received them with comforting words.

(St. Barsanuphius, *Response* 459)

Hence he [Abraham] was found worthy of that wonderful banquet when he received angels and the Master of all as his guests. We too, then, should actively and eagerly cultivate hospitality so that we may receive not only angels, but also God Himself.

(*Philokalia*, vol. II, p. 85, St. Theodore, Bishop of Edessa)

O blessed [Abraham], how great was that kind of good you were vouchsafed! For your friends and banquet guests were God with the angels.

(St. Neophytus of Cyprus, Homily 14, *Homilies*, ed. 1914, p. 217)

When our father Abraham gave hospitality to strangers, he welcomed Christ the Lord with His angels.

(St. Paulinus of Nola, *Epistle to Pammachius*, 13, 21)

For you are not ignorant that the Supreme God first appeared to Abraham and conversed with him in that place [Mambre].... there first the Saviour Himself, with the two angels, vouchsafed to Abraham a manifestation of His presence; there God first appeared to men.

(St. Constantine the Great, *Letter to Macarius and the Other Bishops of Palestine*, PG 20, 1116B, NPN Second Series, I, 533)

The man who spoke with Abraham was also God and Lord, while the two angels who were seen with the Lord and whom he sent to Lot, are described by the prophet as angels and nothing more.

(*ibid.*, 31)

Thou seest that Abraham, in looking for guests, received God himself to entertain. Thou seest that Lot received the angels.

(Saint Ambrose, *The Duties of the Clergy*, II, 21)

If our adversaries will understand this passage as referred to the Father, then the rest of the record does not agree with it. For the Father did not appear to Abraham, nor did Abraham wash the feet of God the Father, but the feet of Him in Whom is the image of the man that shall be. Moreover, the Son of God saith, “Abraham saw My day and rejoiced” (John 8:56). It is He [the Son] therefore, who sware by Himself and Whom Abraham saw.

(Saint Ambrose, *On the Christian Faith*,  
II, 8 (72), NF10, 233)

The Son of God Who descended from on high with two angels asked Abraham, “Where is Sarah thy wife?”

(Saint Epiphanius of Cyprus,  
from Nicephorus Theotokes, hieromonk,  
*Collection of One Hundred Fifty  
Commentators on the Octateuch and Kings*,  
Leipzig, 1772, Vol. I, pg. 235)

For here in Abraham’s tabernacle, both the angels and their Master appeared together. But afterwards, the former, as servants were sent for the destruction of those cities, while the latter remained.

(St. John Chrysostom, *PG* 54:387)

And therefore these righteous... thinking they welcomed men, were deemed worthy of welcoming both angels and the Lord of the angels.

(*ibid.*, 405)

Theotokos, the honorable angels and all the saints.” Further, it explains why it is permitted to depict the Son: “we portray in colors His humanity. For the invisible God appeared on earth to men, among whom He kept company... We venerate the icon of Christ, that is, the countenance of Him Who was seen by men, though He was not separated from His invisible divinity.” Also, the Pan-Orthodox Council of 1666 and the Constantinopolitan Council of 1780 specifically forbid the depiction of the Holy Trinity, and they call this depiction an innovation from the Latin West.

As for the icon of the “Hospitality of Abraham”, all the ancient commentators — Ss. Justin the philosopher and martyr (✠167), Irenaeus of Lyons (✠202), Hilary of Poitiers (✠449), Ambrose of Milan (✠397), Epiphanius of Cyprus (✠403), John Chrysostom (✠407), Romanus the Melodist (✠556), Symeon of the Wondrous Mountain (✠595), Barsanuphius the Great (✠545), John the Damascene (✠760), Theodore of Edessa (✠9th century), Neophytus the cloistered of Cyprus (✠1204), and Paulinus of Nola (✠431)— teach that in this instance, it was our pre-incarnate Saviour, the Word of God, and two angels who appeared—not the Holy Trinity. The icon of the Hospitality of Abraham may be said to be only a symbol or type of the Holy Trinity (because of the number of the visitors). Therefore, God the Father is not depicted in the holy icons, although He is the cause of all things as well as the end-purpose of all things. From him all visible and invisible creatures have their beginning, and there was a time when they did not exist. The earth too had a beginning, and man was created by God’s love. He created the universe out of nothing. Only God is uncreated.

However, the creation of man and of the universe was not a necessity. Creation is the work of the free and unconditional will of the Creator. If He had so wished, He need not have created us; the absence of creation would not have been a privation for Him. The creature’s love is not a necessity for him; God has no need to be satisfied. He transcends every need and every necessity. He is infinite, beyond every definition and description or depiction.

God's love cannot be compared to human love, even as his other attributes such as paternity, justice, goodness cannot be compared to their human counterparts. God's love is a love which constitutes a mystery unfathomable to man's reason or intellect. God has no "emotions" which might create passion, suffering, need or necessity in Him. Nevertheless, although the nature of divine love remains incomprehensible and inexplicable to human reason, this love is real and genuine, for according to the Scriptures, God is love.

**Some passages from the saints of the Church confirming that it was our Lord, the Son and Word of God along with two angels, and not the Holy Trinity or God the Father, that appeared to Abraham at the Oak of Mambre.**

Moses, then, the blessed and faithful servant of God, declares that He who appeared to Abraham under the Oak in Mambre is God sent with two angels in His company to judge Sodom by Another, who remains ever in the super-celestial places, invisible to all men, holding personal converse with none, Whom we believe to be the Maker and Father of all things.

(St. Justin martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho*, 56:1)

And now have you not perceived, my friends, that one of the three, Who is both God and Lord, and ministers to Him Who is in the Heavens, is Lord of the two angels?

(*ibid.*, 56:15)

Therefore neither Abraham, nor Isaac, Jacob, nor any other man, saw the Father and ineffable Lord of all, and also of Christ, but [saw] Him who according to His will His Son, being God also, and the Angel because He ministered to His will; Whom also it pleased Him to be born man by the Virgin; Who also was fire when He conversed with Moses from the bush. Since, unless we have thus comprehended the Scriptures, it must follow that the Father and Lord of all had not been in Heaven when what Moses wrote took place: "And the Lord rained upon Sodom fire and brimstone from the Lord out of Heaven" (Gen. 19:24)

(*ibid.*, 127:4)

It was not the Father who stood in a specific place and spoke with Abraham. It was the Word of God who ever abides with the race of man.

(St. Irenaeus, *Proof of the Apostolic Preaching*, 44)

Two of the three were angels, but the one was the son of God.

(*ibid.*, 43)

Afterwards there appear to him three men. Abraham, though he sees three, worships One and acknowledges Him as Lord. Three were standing before him, Scripture says, but he knew well which it was that he must worship and confess.

(Saint Hilary of Poitiers, *On the Trinity*, IV, 25)

It was a man whom he saw, yet Abraham worshipped Him as Lord; he beheld, no doubt in a mystery the coming Incarnation.... Next two of the three men whom Abraham saw depart; He who remains behind is Lord and God.... Thus by all his words, Abraham instructs us in that faith for which he was justified; he recognized the Lord from among the three, he worships Him only, and confesses that He is Lord and Judge.

(*ibid.*, 27)

Lest you fall into the error of supposing that this acknowledgment of the One was a payment of honor to all the three whom Abraham saw in company, mark the words of Lot when he saw the two who had departed; "And when Lot saw them, he rose up to meet them, he bowed himself with his face toward the ground; and he said, 'Behold, my Lords, turn into your servants'" (Gen. 18:25). Here the plural "Lords" show that this was nothing more than a vision of angels; in the other case, the faithful patriarch pays the honor due to the One only. Thus the sacred narrative makes it clear that two of the three were mere angels.... The Scripture is accurate and consistent; we detect no such confusion as the plural used of the one God and Lord, no divine honors paid to the two angels.

(*ibid.*, 28)